The number of stepfamilies is increasing, as sources indicate that one out of every three Americans is a member of a stepfamily (Larson, 1992). Although stepfamilies have been the focus of many psychology studies for a number of years, as stepfamilies have been more frequently created through divorce and remarriage, research interest in stepfamilies has increased (Coleman & Ganong, 1990). Despite the increasing prevalence of stepparents, however, differences remain in perceptions of stepparents versus biological parents (e.g., Stewart, 2005). This suggests that there might be differences between biological families and stepfamilies.

One of the differences between biological families and stepfamilies might be differences in expectations. It may be assumed that everyone has expectations in regards to certain duties that parents should perform. For example, most people would probably agree that parents should be responsible for protecting their children from harm and providing them with the tools to lead healthy lives. However, are stepparents expected to be responsible in the same way as biological parents? The negative connotations associated with stepparents (e.g., the evil stepmother from Cinderella) imply that stepparents are viewed differently than biological parents. This might mean that the expectations of stepparents are lower than those of biological parents. It is likely that there exists variability in the expectations that children have of stepparents in comparison to biological parents. If differences exist between stepfamilies and non-stepfamilies, is it possible that differences exist within stepfamilies? If so, what are these differences? Some people may have high expectations of stepparents whereas some may have low expectations. In order to understand these concepts it would also be useful to examine what factors may be associated with expectations of stepparents.

The current study deals with expectations that stepchildren have of their stepparents. The goal of this study is to examine two possible factors that might be associated with the expectations of stepparents: age of the child and friendliness of the relationship. In light of this goal, the remainder of the introduction is divided into four sections. The first section discusses perceptions of the stepparent role. The next section discusses expectations in relation to the age of the child. The third section discusses friendliness of the relationship. The fourth section provides an overview of the current study, which is designed to examine whether age
and friendliness of the relationship are associated with the expectations of stepparents.

**Perceptions of Stepparents**

Are there differences in expectations for stepparenting and non-stepparenting? In a 1984 study by Sims-Giles, parental roles in stepfamilies were examined. This study examined the roles of stepparents, the actual practices of parents within the family, and any sanctions that a parent may face for not performing the parental tasks regarding the stepchild (this was described as what a husband or wife would think of a spouse who did not take responsibility for a stepchild). Interviews were conducted with 99 families in which either one or both of the parents had a child from a previous marriage. The participants were asked questions relating to the perceptions of their own families. The results showed that 95.5% of participants expected both the husband and the wife to share equally in raising the children from the present marriage (i.e., non-stepparents). However, 59% expected equal duty in raising children from the wife’s previous marriage (i.e., stepparents), and 52.1% expected equal duty in raising children from the husband’s previous marriage (i.e., stepchildren). These findings show that expectations for parenting a child from another marriage are lower than those for parenting a child that is biologically related to both parents. The researchers found that actual enactment of these expectations was even lower than what was expected for both non-stepparents and stepparents, meaning that husbands and wives did not share the responsibilities of the family as equally as was expected. This research lends support to the idea that expectations of parents and stepparents differ. However, the specific expectations of stepparents are still not clear. These findings suggest that there may be a lack of consensus about the roles and expectations of stepparents.

Therefore, what is the role of the stepparent? Are stepparents expected to discipline their stepchildren? How much of a role should the stepparent play in parenting? Research indicates that the answers to these questions are unclear. In a study by Schwebel, Fine and Renner (1991), perceptions of the stepparent role were examined. The goal of this study was to examine if there is a general consensus about the role of stepparents. They investigated whether there was a consensus on how stepparents should react in parenting situations by surveying undergraduate students. The students were presented with a series of vignettes that described situations that would require a parent or a stepparent to provide some sort of support to the child. For example, some of the vignettes described scenarios in which the parent or stepparent would be asked to provide money for college tuition or the parent or stepparent would be asked to tend to a sick child. Their hypothesis was that there would be no clearly defined social consensus with respect to whether stepparents should fulfill them. The results of this study supported the hypotheses. There was great variance in how participants thought that stepparents should react to the situations they were presented with in the vignettes. Also, results showed that the participants felt stepparents were less likely and less obligated to participate in some of the parenting roles that biological parents are involved with. This research shows that perhaps it is not simply that stepparents are viewed negatively and as having little parental responsibility. Some may view stepparents negatively and do not expect them to play the same roles that biological parents do, but some may see the stepparent role as more similar to the biological parent role. Given this variability, what helps predict it? What factors are associated with high versus low expectations of stepparents?

**Age and Expectations**

Since previous research has suggested that there is no defined role for stepparents, this implies that the expectations of stepparents are unclear as well. Some people have high expectations and others have low expectations. What factors may predict whose expectations are high and whose are low? The age of the child may be an important predictor of expectations. There exists research that suggests that children have different support needs at different times in their lives. Some of the research suggests that children have different needs depending on their ages. For instance, in a 1992 study, Furman and Buhrmester examined how children perceived family members and friends in terms of support at different ages. The results of this study suggest that the younger children rated their parents as the most frequent providers of support, but the older children named friends and romantic partners as taking over this role. Results also indicate that the rating of parents as providers of support declined during pre-adolescence and adolescence. This research suggests that there are different parental support needs and expectations for children of different ages. Given this, the behavior of someone in the child’s life may differ depending on the age of the child. For example, stepparents’ behavior may differ depending on the child’s age when they became the stepparent. Specifically, people who become a stepparent of a young child may provide more support to the child, while people who become a stepparent of an older child may provide less support to the child. Thus, the child may have specific perceptions of support
and this may be associated with expectations of the stepparent.

Previous research suggests that children's support needs and support sources might differ with their age. For instance, previous research suggests that children will seek different types of social support from different members of their social groups (Furman & Buhrmester, 1985). Fifth and sixth graders were asked to apply relationship qualities such as affection and companionship to different family members, friends, and teachers. It was found that children tended to rate mothers and fathers highest on providing support such as "affection, reliable alliance, enhancement of worth, and instrumental aid" (Furman & Buhrmester, 1985, p. 1021). Different types of support were sought from different members of social groups such as friends, extended family members and teachers. This information, coupled with the suggestion that parents are rated as most important providers of support when children are younger helps to show that children perceive their parents as having specific roles, especially when the children are younger. Therefore, it may be reasonable to argue that if a stepparent enters a child's life when the child is younger, the child may expect the stepparent to play a role similar to the roles described here for parents.

Previous research, which has directly examined the stepparent's perception of the parenting role in relation to the age of the child, supports this idea. In a 1992 study by Marsiglio, the roles of stepparents and perceived relationship quality were examined. Stepfathers were asked how old their stepchildren were when they entered the children's lives, and then were asked to rate their relationship with the stepchildren. Results showed that the stepfathers were more likely to perceive themselves as "father-like" when they entered the children's lives when the children were young.

If stepfathers are more likely to view themselves as "father-like" if they enter the child's life when the child is young, then it might be that the child also would view the stepfather as more "father-like." Thus, this might be associated with the expectations of the stepfather. In other words, as was found with stepfathers, children might be more likely to view the stepparents as more "parent-like" if their stepparent entered their life at a younger age. With all of this in mind, it is expected that if the child is young when the stepparent enters the child's life then the expectations of the stepparent will be higher than if the stepparent enters the child's life when the child is older.

Type of Relationship

It seems possible that age might play a role in the expectations that stepchildren have of their stepparents. More specifically, if the stepparent enters the child's life when the child is young the expectations of the stepparent might be higher than if the stepparent enters the child's life when the child is not young. However, it might be possible for other factors to interact with the age of the child when the stepparent enters the child's life. What might interact with age? The answer might be based on the type of relationship that the child has with the stepparent. There might be variability in terms of the children's relationship with their stepparent, as not all children will be equally close to their stepparents. Some children might be very close to their stepparents and trust their stepparents. These children might expect more from their stepparents than children who are not as close to their stepparents, especially if their stepparents also entered their lives at younger ages.

Previous research suggests that children do, in fact, view themselves as having a close relationship with other people than their parents. For instance, a study by Kurdek and Fine (1993) examined whether children perceive that they received both warmth and supervision from family members who are not their parents. The results of this study indicated that adolescents not only perceive their parents as providers of warmth and supervision, but other family members are viewed in this way as well. If it is possible to view other family members as providers of warmth and supervision, which are suggested to be important provisions of the parental role, then perhaps it is possible to view a stepparent in such a way. This may be recognized as a positive relationship and thus expectations of the stepparent might be associated with the type of relationship.

Part of feeling positive about a stepparent or close to a stepparent might include feeling understood by a stepparent. For instance, in a 1999 study by Martin, Anderson and Mottet, the stepparent-stepchild relationship was examined. The researchers in this study chose to examine if there is a relationship between how much a stepchild felt understood by a stepparent, and how much the stepchild disclosed to the stepparent. Results of this study indicate that the more the child felt that he or she was understood by the stepparent, the more he or she disclosed. This study is significant because it demonstrates an important characteristic of the stepchild-stepparent relationship. It suggests that self disclosure and understanding describe a more positive relationship. Perhaps people who feel that their stepparent understands them and thereby discloses more information might have greater expectations of a stepparent than people who do not feel understood by a stepparent.
If closeness and disclosure are associated with children’s relationships with their stepparents, what sorts of features are related to close relationships? One way to address this question is to turn to research conducted in the context of other types of relationships. Factors that are associated with feelings of closeness in other relationships are also likely to be associated with the closeness in the stepparent-stepchild relationship.

For instance, in a study conducted in 2004, Fehr investigated intimacy in friendships. She looked at whether there exists a pattern of factors that people recognize as being associated with intimacy in a friendship and if some factors are considered to be more important than others. The results of this study may be summarized by stating that people possess sophisticated, intricate knowledge of the many ways of relating that are likely to produce a sense of intimacy in a same-sex friendship. Expectations of intimacy are created when people experience responsive self-disclosure, when they can count on a friend for comfort and cheering up (emotional support), when they feel assured that problems will be resolved, when a friend helps them achieve important personal goals, and so on (p. 279).

Self-disclosure patterns and social—particularly emotional—support were deemed the most influential in creating intimacy. Also, it was found that people saw intimacy patterns as most important in measuring friendships in terms of friendship maintenance, meaning that people tend to base this intimacy on established friendships as opposed to new or deteriorating ones. This research helps define social patterns that are associated with intimacy. If stepchildren and stepparents are able to categorize their relationships as possessing such qualities, then it might be likely that their relationships are friendlier. If this is the case, then the expectations that the stepchildren have of the stepparents might be different from those of the stepchildren who do not experience such a relationship with their stepparents.

Overview of Current Study

The goal of the present study was to investigate two factors that may be associated with the expectations of stepparents. It was hypothesized the age a child is when a stepparent enters his or her life will be associated with the stepchild’s expectations and that this association will be moderated by the stepchild/stepparent relationship. More specifically, it was hypothesized that, the younger a child is when a stepparent enters his or her life, the more the child will view the stepparent as a parental figure and the child’s expectations will reflect this. I predict that this will be especially true if the stepchild and stepparent have a strong relationship based in friendship.

Method

Participants

In order to test this hypothesis an online questionnaire was developed. The requirements for being included in this study were that the participants had to have at least one stepparent and that the participants needed to be at least 18 years old. Participants were recruited through a number of ways. Flyers were distributed in psychology classes and in residence halls at C.W. Post campus. Also, links to the survey were added to a number of online websites such as www.socialpsychology.org, www.w-lab.de/lab-united/experiments.php, www.stepfamily.asn.au, and www.thestepfamilylife.com. Links were also added to search engines such as Yahoo! and Google.

In order to guard against duplicate participant submissions, IP addresses and dates were checked. There was one duplicate submission and the duplicate response was deleted. As a result of this, the sample for this study consisted of 60 participants. Sixteen (27%) participants were male and 40 (67%) participants were female. Four participants (7%) did not provide their age. The age of the remaining participants ranged from 19 to 56 years old and the mean age was 27.18 with a standard deviation of 7.43. A majority of the participants (82%) resided in the United States. Four of the participants (7%) did not report their country. Five participants (8%) were from Australia and two (3%) were from Canada. Three participants (5%) did not report whether or not they currently reside with their stepparents. A majority of the participants, 43 (72%), were not currently residing with their stepparents while 14 (23%) reported that they did currently reside with their stepparents. Of those participants who reported that they did not currently reside with their stepparents, 79% did reside with their stepparents at one point. When presented with a scale ranging from 1 (meaning never) to 5 (meaning every day), in order to measure how much contact participants had with their stepparents every week, the average response was 2.26 with a standard deviation of 1.25. When presented with a scale ranging from 1 (meaning never) and 5 (meaning every day), in order to measure how much contact the participants had with their stepparents every year, the average response was 3.25 with a standard deviation of 1.00. Four participants (7%) did not report how often they contacted their stepparents. Five participants (8%) did not report whether or not they had stepchildren.
Forty-five (75%) reported having stepsiblings and ten (17%) reported having no stepsiblings. The mean age of the child when the stepparent became the child's stepparent was 11.79 with a standard deviation of 6.28. Ages ranged from 2 to 32 years old.

**Measures**

Expectations of stepparents. In order to measure the variable of expectations of stepparents a revised version of The Family Roles Questionnaire (Schwebel, Fine, & Renner, 1991) was used. This measure contained questions that provided scenarios that children might encounter. An example of a scenario is:

> “Imagine that you are a serious, 19 year old student who is doing well at a state university. You work for a mathematics professor to earn extra money. After learning that your tuition, room, and board will be raised substantially in the fall, you call your stepparent to ask for a $1,500 loan.”

Following each scenario were two questions, which were revised from the original Family Roles Questionnaire to address the stepparent rather than the biological parent. One question addressed how likely participants felt it was for their stepparent to perform the action described in the scenario. Participants responded to this question on a Likert-scale, from 1-7. A rating of 1 indicated that the stepparent was not likely at all to perform the action. A rating of 7 indicated that the stepparent was extremely likely to perform the action. The second question addressed how much participants felt that their stepparents should perform the action described in the scenario. Participants responded to this question on a Likert-scale, ranging from 1-7. A rating of 1 indicated that the participant thought that the stepparent definitely should not perform the action and a rating of 7 indicated that the participant thought that the stepparent definitely should perform the action described in the scenario. The ratings from both how likely participants felt their stepparents would be to perform the action and how much the participants felt that their stepparent should perform the action were summed following the procedures of Schwebel, Fine and Renner (1991). The scale score that was created could range from 24 to 168. A score of 24 indicated low expectations and a score of 168 indicated high expectations. This measure had a Cronbach’s alpha of .90.

**Friendliness of relationship.** In order to measure the type of relationship that the participant had with his or her stepparent a number of statements were created based on the results of a study conducted by Fehr (2004). In Fehr’s study participants were asked to list characteristics that implied intimacy between friends. A list of these statements was compiled. For the current study, the ten statements that were mentioned most frequently were selected to measure friendliness of the relationship between children and stepparents. These included statements such as, “If I need to talk my stepparent will listen” and “If I am lonely my stepparent will provide companionship”. Participants were asked to rate these statements on a scale from 1 to 7 with respect to how likely they were to be true. A rating of 1 indicated that the statement was very not likely and a rating of 7 indicated that the statement was very likely. A scale score was created for this measure as well. The scores could range from 10 to 70, with a score of 10 indicating low friendliness and a score of 70 indicating high friendliness. This scale had high internal reliability, with an alpha of .96.

**Age.** Participants were asked to report the age at which their stepparent entered their life.

**Results**

**Age and Expectations**

It was hypothesized that the age of a child when a stepparent enters the child’s life would be associated with the expectations that the child has of the stepparent. More specifically, it was hypothesized that, the younger the child was when the stepparent entered the child’s life, the higher the expectations of the stepparent would be. In order to test whether this was the case, a correlation between the age of the child when the biological parent and stepparent married and the expectations of the stepparent was calculated. Results indicate that there was a significant negative correlation between the child’s age when the biological parent and stepparent married and the expectations of the stepparent (r = -.26, p < .05). Thus, these findings suggest that, in support of this hypothesis, the younger the child is when the stepparent enters the child’s life, the higher the expectations of the stepparent.

**Type of Relationship**

It was hypothesized that the association between age and expectations would be especially pronounced if the child and the stepparent had a positive, friendly relationship. That is, it was predicted that there would be an interaction between age of the child at the marriage of the biological parent and stepparent and friendliness of the relationship and that this interaction would be associated with expectations of the stepparent. In order to test the second hypothesis, a linear regression was used. The outcome variable was expectations and the predictor variables were age, friendliness, and the interaction of age and friendliness. The results show that there was no significant inter-
action (β = -0.01, SE = 0.02, p = .96). This suggests that, in contrast to the second hypothesis, the association between age and expectations is not especially pronounced among those with more friendly relationships with their stepparent.

However, it was also found from the results of the regression that, controlling for friendliness, the age at marriage was no longer significantly associated with expectations (β = -0.09, SE = 0.33, p = .80). At the same time, it was found that, controlling for age at marriage, friendship was positively associated with the expectations of the stepparent, (β = 1.15, SE = 0.13, p < .01).

These results suggest that, rather than friendliness being a moderator of age and expectations, friendliness may be a mediator. That is, friendliness does not appear to explain when age and expectations are related; instead, friendliness may explain why age and expectations are related. In order to test for mediation, there are four steps that must be completed, as was suggested by Baron and Kenny (1986). The first step is that the predictor variable, in this case age of the child when the stepparent enters his or her life, must be related to the mediator, which in this case was the expectations of the stepparent. This relationship was found in the first correlation that was conducted. The second step is that the predictor variable (age) must be related to the mediator, which in this case is friendliness. A correlation between friendliness and age was conducted, and these two variables were found to be significantly associated (r = -.29, p < .05).

The third step is that the mediator (level of friendliness) must be related to the outcome variable (level of expectations). The correlation between friendliness and expectations was found to be positive and significant (r = .80, p < .001). The fourth step is that the relationship between the predictor variable (age) and the outcome variable (expectations) must disappear when including the mediator (friendliness). This was found with the linear regression reported above. Thus, these results suggest that friendship may explain why the age of a child when a stepparent enters his or her life is associated with the expectations of a stepparent. People whose stepparent enters their life at a younger age may have a friendlier relationship with their stepparent. This friendliness, in turn, appears to be associated with higher expectations of stepparents.

Discussion

Summary of Results

It was hypothesized that a relationship would exist between the age of children at which stepparents enter their lives and the expectations stepchildren have of their stepparents. More specifically, it was hypothesized that if a stepparent entered a child’s life when the child was young then the child would have higher expectations of the stepparent. It was further hypothesized that this would be especially true if the child and the stepparent had a positive, friendly relationship. The results of this study suggest that an association does exist between the age of a child when a stepparent enters his or her life and the expectations of the stepparent. The younger the child was when the stepparent entered his or her life, the higher the expectations were of the stepparent. The first hypothesis was supported. This finding suggests that some of the variability in relationships between stepparents and stepchildren and in expectations of stepparents (e.g., Sims-Giles, 1984; Schwebel, Fine and Renner, 1991) may be explained, in part, through when the stepparent entered the stepchild’s life. However, these results also suggest that the friendliness of the relationship between the stepparent and the child was not significant in predicting when expectations of the stepparent would be high. Rather, it seems that friendliness of the relationship is significant in explaining why age is associated to expectations. It seems that if a stepparent enters the child’s life when the child is young, it is likely that the child and the stepparent have more time to develop a friendly relationship than if the stepparent enters the child’s life when the child is older. Thus, the second hypothesis was not supported, but these results suggest that children whose stepparents enter their lives when they are younger are more likely to develop friendlier relationships, and have higher expectations of stepparents.

Strengths and Limitations

There were a number of strengths of this study. One of these strengths was that the survey was anonymous. This allowed participants to answer honestly without fear of their answers being recognized and ruled out any social desirability issues that may have influenced answers thus providing a more accurate response. Another strength of the current study was that there was a wide range of participants, with participants from three different countries and a wide range of ages. This variability in demographic characteristics of participants suggests that the results of the current study may generalize to many types of people. In addition to these strengths, the current study’s measures showed high internal reliability. This is important because sometimes there exists a reluctance to conduct surveys over the Internet as there is a fear that participants will not take the surveys seriously. However, in this case the high reliability among the questions in the measures supports the idea that participants did answer seriously. In other words, given
the high internal reliability of the scales, it is unlikely that participants simply answered each question in a haphazard manner. The fact that the measures had high internal reliability also suggests that the concept of friendliness of the relationship was generalizable to stepparents. That measure was created from a measure originally used to assess intimacy within friendships. However, the high level of internal reliability found in the current study suggests that people do have a general concept of the level of intimacy and emotional closeness they have with their stepparent, just as the results of Fehr’s (2004) study suggests that they have with respect to their friends.

There were also some limitations to this study as well. One of the most significant limitations was that the survey questions designed to examine expectations of stepparents were hypothetical scenarios. Participants had to imagine themselves in the situations described in the scenarios and speculate as to how their stepparent would respond and how they would expect their stepparent to respond. When hypothetical scenarios are used to measure variables there always remains the possibility that participants would respond or feel differently when presented with the actual scenario. Furthermore, given the age of the participants, many participants may have been basing their answers to questions about expectations of a stepparent on their memories of growing up with their stepparent, rather than on their current relationship with their stepparent. Finally, this study defined the relationship of the stepparent and child in terms of emotional intimacy. It may be possible to define the relationship in other ways, including self-disclosure, time spent together in activity, and warmth. Therefore, this study was limited to examining just one aspect of the sort of relationship that participants had with their stepparent.

**Directions for Future Research**

The results of this study suggest that friendship might explain why there exists an association between age and expectations of the stepparent. In order to examine these concepts further, future research should examine other factors that might predict when there is a particularly strong relationship between age and expectations. In other words, other factors that might moderate the association between age and expectations might also want to be explored, since the results of the current study suggest that friendship acts as a mediator, and not a moderator. For example, the relationship that the child has with the biological parent might be taken into account. It might be that if a child is young when the stepparent enters his or her life that the child will have higher expectations of the stepparent, especially if they have a good relationship with the biological parent. The child might have more trust in the biological parent if the relationship is good and therefore might trust in the parent to make better decisions and thus the stepparent might be accepted more easily and expectations might be higher (see e.g., Heider, 1958). However, this could also go in the opposite direction. If the child has a good relationship with the biological parent and then a new person who is not part of the family enters the situation and in the child’s eyes threatens the bond between himself or herself and the parent, then the child might be less accepting of the stepparent and thus have lower expectations.

Another factor that may want to be taken into consideration is the child’s view of the divorce between the biological parents. If the new stepparent enters the child’s life when the child is young, and the divorce between the biological parents was amicable, the child might be more likely to be accepting of a new stepparent and have higher expectations because the child might not suffer as much from the divorce and thus be able to better understand the situation (see e.g., Grych & Fincham, 1990). It is also possible though, that the child will maintain an extremely positive view of both parents and the parents’ marriage and therefore not be as understanding as to why the parents got divorced in the first place. As a result of this the child might be less accepting of a new stepparent and have lower expectations.

An additional direction for future research would be to investigate other factors that might be associated with the expectations of stepparents. For example, researchers might want to examine the association between previous stepparent/child relationships and current stepparent/child relationships. It is becoming increasingly common for children to have more than one stepparent over time (see Coleman & Ganong, 1990). If a child has had more than one stepparent and the child did not have high expectations of the previous stepparents then perhaps the child would not have high expectations of the new stepparent. This might provide a better perspective on what factors help predict the expectations that children have of stepparents.

**Conclusion**

The current study offers some interesting findings about the expectations that children have of stepparents. Specifically, this study suggests that the age of the child when a stepparent enters his or her life is negatively associated with the expectations of the stepparent. This study also suggests that the friendliness of the relationship between the child and the
stepparent might explain why age is associated with
expectations. Thus, this study helps to answer the ques-
tion as to why differences exist among stepfamilies
and what factors help to predict these differences. In
the future, more studies should be designed to exam-
ine what other factors help to address these questions.

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